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### Trust in the Indian labour diaspora

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## Trust in the Indian Labour Diaspora\*

Dear Sirs,

The bearer of this, Dhibby Deen, is a man of good character, who returns to his native country with a sum of money. His intention being to come back to Mauritius, we authorise you, should he apply to you for the cost of his passage, to pay the same at a rate not exceeding Co.'s Rs. 30, besides the cost of food as well as to any able-bodied men who may wish to accompany him, not exceeding 50 in number, forwarding to us their receipt in duplicate for the sum paid.

We remain, &c.

Chapman Barclay

Port Louis, Mauritius, 23 November 1840

Dhibby Deen had originally travelled to Calcutta from Gorakhpur for service as a *chaprasi* [office messenger], but had instead been recruited as a 'coolie' worker for a sugar plantation in Mauritius. After completing a 5 year indenture contract he returned with 400 rupees in savings, and a certificate, together with a 'general order to Colville, Gilmore & Co.', a mercantile firm in Calcutta.<sup>1</sup> The certificate from his employer (reproduced above), illustrates the critical role of informal networks and trust in the recruitment of Indians for indentured labour overseas. This paper investigates the role of such trust relationships through a re-examination of the activities of intermediaries (recruiters) in the Indian indentured labour system of the Indian ocean in the colonial era.

Trust has been an influential strand in sociological thinking and in recent developmental discourse. The present study reviews its utilization in the literature of colonial subaltern migration and applies these insights to a specific historical context. Knowledge and information gained by indentured workers from recruiters, rather than the former's blind faith in the latter, is key to understanding patterns in labour

mobilisation, particularly in the Indian Ocean region where levels of returnee/*sirdari*/*kangani* recruitment were significant.<sup>2</sup> However, competition between returnee recruiters and local agents, rivalry between colonial governments, and competing discourses problematised and complicated the relationship between recruiter and recruit, adding further layers to the trust issue that need to be unpicked. The paper concludes that informal trust networks are critical to an understanding of the operation of indenture, that the appraisal of their functioning and effectiveness necessitates the construction of a counter narrative to the 'official' archive, and suggests a new means of adapting the trust discourse to this field of study through an assessment of how these knowledge and information networks were disseminated by key mediators outside and beyond state-controlled infrastructures although not necessarily in conflict with them.

### **The Concept of 'Trust' and its Applications in the Study of Indian Migration**

In sociological literature, trust is seen as especially important when there is an element of risk in an undertaking, as was most certainly the case in long-distance and overseas migration.<sup>3</sup> Trust reduces complexity and inspires confidence. Trust can be reflexive in an individual relationship. It is also commonly negotiated in a collective where, for example, a group of workers have placed their confidence in a single leader or overseer. Both types of relationships are considered in this article. Confidence or 'trust' in institutions typically depends upon three types of determinants: the socio-economic characteristics and the personality traits of the individuals involved, the performance of the government, and the cultural environment.<sup>4</sup> In developmental discourse, trust revolves around problems of illegality, corruption, and breaches of contract that

discourage investment. Indices of 'trust' are employed to demonstrate that where levels are low, development is stymied. Institution building is commonly presented as a solution, in particular the shoring up of judicial institutions so as to ensure accountability and transparency in economic relations and the upholding of contracts. The answer in other words is conceived as lying entirely with the strengthening of the formal sector of the economy. It assumes that arrangements to ensure the security of contracts are largely absent within the informal economy, which in the developing world accounts for the bulk of economic activity.<sup>5</sup> The public discourse on 'corruption' is therefore represented as an ideological conflict between those advocating modern, formal methods of judicial enforcement, over the 'moral economy' which most often prevails in economic relationships.<sup>6</sup>

Evidence of the breach of trust within the informal sector commonly comes to light through the formal judicial process. However, this paper will argue that these cases are not characteristic of, but rather constitute only a small element within a pyramid of personal networks and informal arrangements that worked to ensure the security of economic relationships. They come to light when parallel, informal methods of brokerage and arbitration break down and alternative remedies are sought to refine and restore the association.

The application of trust to colonial contexts has been facilitated by developments in the theoretical literature which has challenged outdated views of centre and periphery.<sup>7</sup> Across the British empire, as Natasha Glaisyer has shown, trust was required 'at every stage in the process of buying and selling goods. 'Conceiving of empire as a set

of networks of trust, trade, and commercial information' her work brings together the 'small island' and the 'large empire.' Linking diverse places this series of networks enable knowledge to be exchanged, commodities to be traded, trust negotiated and people to travel – albeit often involuntarily.<sup>8</sup> The importance of 'trust' – the reliability of parties - in non-western settings has been evidenced by Peter Robb's case study of Mr Upjohn's circle in Calcutta. As he points out, 'Calcutta practices, such as trust, goodwill, privilege, and mutual support among networks of friends and allies, imply systems (not structures), including a specific 'sense of limits' within the 'practical kinship' of groups whose members thought about their unity, and hence an informal cultural code that disposed the members to certain motives and actions.' His study also bears witness to the pragmatic 'continual adjustments and exchanges' that took place.<sup>9</sup> Such research ties into the renewed interest in the history of emotions (or 'emotionology') within the historical discipline<sup>10</sup>, but it should not be confined to the realm of European elites. European merchants operating in India chose or were commonly obliged to include local Asian moneylenders and merchants in their circles of 'trust'. Historians have likewise drawn attention to the extension of credit relationships to African merchants as a crucial factor in the maintenance and extent of the slave trade.<sup>11</sup> The personal relationships based on trust between parties located in Bristol and Liverpool on the one hand and 'Old Calabar' on the other were naturally conducted through the use of intermediaries, whose actions could at any time damage the fiduciary character of the transactions. Additional mechanisms might be put in place to counteract adverse incidents and to offer additional guarantees. In the slave trading context, relatives of African dealers might be offered as 'pawns' to ensure that slaves would be supplied in return for goods delivered, and in riposte it sometimes happened that a sailor would be

seized to ensure the release of a ‘pawn’.<sup>12</sup> Where trading relationships on trust broke down, the repercussions could be long-lasting.<sup>13</sup>

As was the case for transactions between European merchants in Britain and slave dealers in Africa, the reliance on intermediaries was important to the management of subaltern migration streams from India. During the colonial period it was common for Indian migrants, whether convicts, or indentured labourers to view themselves as ‘Company ke naukari’ [servants of the company].<sup>14</sup> At a time when a private organisation – the East India Company – was effectively governing large swathes of overseas British territories, it is not difficult to understand how ‘company’ could become synonymous with ‘government’. This paper looks at how concepts such as *naukari* could be used and abused within competing and parallel systems of labour migration. Drawing upon evidence of conflicts surrounding the mobilisation and recruitment of Indian migrant labourers sourced from official archives, newspapers and selected published studies, we offer a new methodology for understanding trust in the indenture context by focussing on the important role informal relationships played in the mobilisation of subaltern Indians for overseas labour, particularly in the Indian Ocean, from where the examples used here are drawn. The methodological framework takes account of the difficulties faced by such networks when forced to operate within or alongside a state-controlled migration process. Despite the obstacles and obstruction faced, it is argued that informal networks of trust to operate and were often more effective in their functioning than official documentation, and the literature which continues to be over-reliant on them, would suggest. It is wildly orientalist to assume that workers were only ever driven by fear and deprivation. To avoid this, it is crucial, we contend, to read across the

grain of the colonial archive to tease out the informal networks which determined the ebb and flow of labour across the Indian Ocean world and further afield to the Caribbean and Pacific islands.

### **Personal Relationships, Recruiting Networks and the Operation of *Naukari***

*Naukari* is a Hindi term that traditionally refers to long-distance service, such as in the British East India Company's Army in early nineteenth century India.<sup>15</sup> Overseas military service is an important precursor to indenture. The first indentured migrants were encouraged to see the long-distance recruitment for employment in the British empire as an extension of the '*naukari*' military-type service already familiar to the villagers of northern India. Convict migrants also adopted the term, perhaps preferring to align themselves to workers and sepoys recruited for overseas 'service' rather than as forced labour.<sup>16</sup> This section discusses the application of 'trust' in the context of subaltern Indian migration through the evolution and practice of *naukari*.

The extent to which the British Indian army was derived from and in turn impacted upon the militarised and mobile peasant society of northern India has been underscored by the influential studies of Dirk Kolff, Seema Alavi, Douglas Peers and David Omissi, among others.<sup>17</sup> Sepoys joined the army for pecuniary benefits, but their willingness to do so also relied upon local martial traditions in which the concept of honor was a key component of subaltern identity. These studies underscore the extent to which the sepoys themselves were active in reinforcing and deriving their own benefits from the prevailing ideology, thereby creating their own networks of information and

agency.<sup>18</sup> Self-selection through family, kin and caste ties was a two-way process of trust whilst the expensive wars waged in India in the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century by the East India Company provided opportunities for the most oppressed groups in Indian society – the Kamia of Bihar or Pallans and Paraiyans of southern India - to escape agrestic servitude by enlisting as sepoys.<sup>19</sup>

The relationships of trust which evolved between sepoys and the company were tested by the mobilization of volunteer battalions for overseas campaigns during the period of the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars [1789-1811]. The successful recruitment of troops and followers for the overseas expedition from India against the Mascarene islands in 1810 is a case in point. A first convoy, totalling 1700 Europeans and 1800 natives, left Madras on the 8<sup>th</sup> May 1810, and was considered ‘a strong proof of their attachment to the service, and of their confidence in the British Government’.<sup>20</sup> A second convoy was organised from Bengal in August and September 1810 with the volunteers being promised bounty money, promotions and a prompt return to India after the termination of the engagements.<sup>21</sup> The *Calcutta Morning Post* reported on the embarkation of the sepoys and commented on the measures in place to ensure that difficulties arising from caste-based restrictions were minimized:

It is gratifying to observe, that the prejudices of the Native soldiers, against all service on board of ship or in countries beyond the seas, has, within these few years, been so completely overcome, that such occasions of active employment are now sought for by the sepoys as a matter of honour and distinction. ... One great difficulty attending the employment of sepoys on such service, has very lately been removed, by the arrangements which were adopted for enabling them to cook their victuals on board the transports.<sup>22</sup>



In many respects, recruitment strategies for indentured migrants from the 1830s onwards replicated those set up for sepoys. The rewards system is echoed in the bounties paid to sirdars and returnee recruiters under indenture, for example: 'in times of urgency... reward money was allowed to native soldiers who voluntarily exerted themselves to bring in fresh recruits or a reward in the form of promotion was given. In addition, recruiting parties were occasionally sent out, with the approval of the Commander-in-chief, and native commissioned officers and sepoys were granted leave of absence to recruit men from their native villages.'<sup>23</sup> Dirk Kolff has argued that 'there was no lack of men opting for a life spent as errant soldier, migrant labourer, or pack-animal trader,' and suggests that a good understanding of the traditions of 'naukari' demonstrates the flaws in 'a historiographical tradition that traces the Indian contract labour diaspora to fraud and famine'.<sup>24</sup> Rajesh Rai has also sought to demonstrate how an earlier 'migration' of Hindustanis to Singapore, the outcome of a labour movement tied to the colonial militia and a forced movement of Indian 'convicts' to the penal colony, facilitated the development of a circular migration system of 'free migrants' through movements to and from their villages of origin'.<sup>25</sup>

Habituated to travel, sepoys were to be found among the early contingents of overseas indentured labour. There is much anecdotal evidence to indicate that sepoys viewed indenture as another form of *naukari*. Rengasamy Naicken, who went to Mauritius in the 1830s, had been a sepoy at the Danish settlement at Tranquebar, before travelling to Singapore to pay a visit to his brother resident there. This trip lasted for one year, after which he ended a period of unemployment following a meeting with an acquaintance whom he describes as a man of the Vellala caste from Karrical. 'He said he was going to

Mauritius and desired me to follow him. I consented to it and went along with him to Karrical.’ The reflexive trust established between the two men clearly provided the confidence necessary to undertake the potentially hazardous journey to the far side of the Indian ocean. Manick, a former sepoy of the ‘Indre ka pultun’ (52nd Bengal Native Infantry) decided to migrate inspired by the belief that he was continuing in the service of the British ‘sahib log ka kotee’ [government or company work].<sup>26</sup> Boodhoo Khan, a self-described Pathan of Gya, had previously served as a sepoy with the Rajah of Morbaugh. Having obtained his discharge, he was immediately recruited for colonial labour, and brought to Calcutta. His brother, Sheer Khan, a sepoy at Alipore, sought to dissuade him from making the journey to Mauritius to which Boodhoo responded “this is the Company’s service, and why should I refuse it?”<sup>27</sup>

The presence of sepoys or of men who had been rejected for or discharged from military service in the early streams of migrants embarking for the sugar colonies was well known to the authorities. The Collector of Rajahmundry gave specific details of labourers who had embarked for Mauritius between 1<sup>st</sup> June 1837 and 25<sup>th</sup> August 1838, describing them as ‘composed in some measure of men, who would have engaged as Sepoys had they not been undersized or prevented by some defect, which rendered them ineligible. A few discharged Sepoys have also gone’ along with weavers, servants, lascars and agricultural labourers.<sup>28</sup> In February 1841, a magistrate in Calcutta took it upon himself to question a group of returning labour migrants who had disembarked from the *Graham*. He found their attitudes and explanations in keeping with other seasonal migrants, explaining them as conforming to ‘the habits of the sepoy caste, the bearer

caste, and many others ... the latter take service in Calcutta and the Lower Provinces, and return to their homes after several, sometimes five years' absence.' <sup>29</sup>

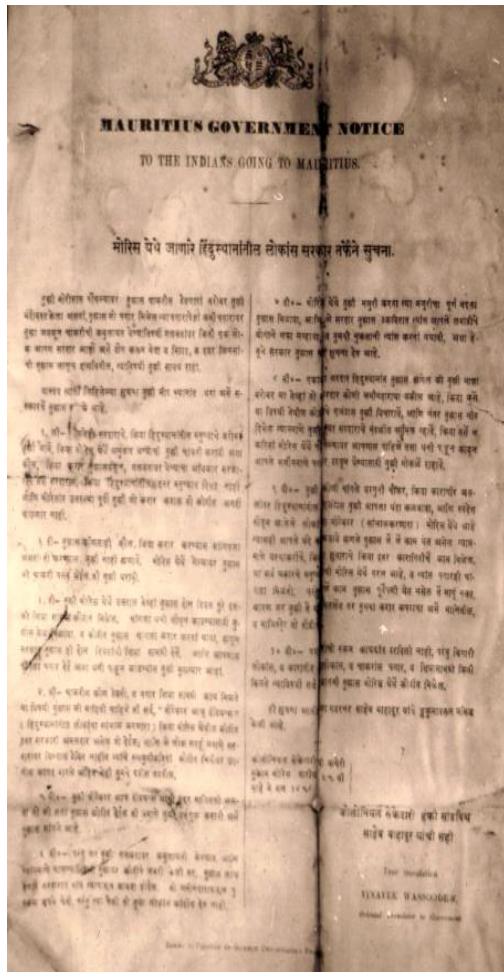
Lascars, or seamen, are the other subaltern group whose experience of entering into relationships of trust to undertake long sea voyages, speaks directly to the indenture experience and can be seen as both a precursor of, and running parallel to the broader system of Indian labour migration. <sup>30</sup> It is no surprise, therefore, to find that recruitment for new types of labour tended to exploit existing traditions of employment in military or seagoing professions.<sup>31</sup> Naukari customs facilitated the incorporation of such men and women into the empire-wide mobilization of South Asian labour, especially in the decades following the abolition of slavery. The following sections will detail more specifically the mechanics through which trust was factored into the contractual arrangements set up for indentured workers and assess how flaws in the official framework regulating migration were countered and circumvented.

### **The Mechanics of Trust: Regulatory institutions and official documentation**

In the 1830s, recruitment of indentured labourers for Mauritius, Réunion and British Guiana was conducted as a private speculation by mercantile houses who employed a network of local recruiters termed *arkatis* and *duffadars* in north India and *mestrys* / *maistries* in south India. In mobilizing these workers, recruiters sought to build upon local traditions of long-distance and seasonal labour migration practices. Recruits would be passed along to one or more intermediaries and often held for days or weeks at *godowns* in port towns and cities before being shipped. Abuses were rife, and reformists were able to highlight shocking allegations of kidnapping and forced

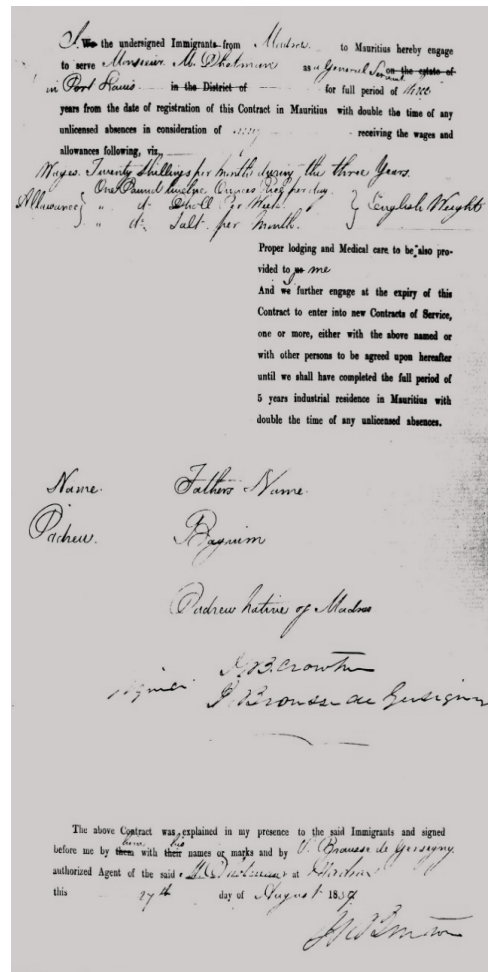
confinement. The trust that migrants had invested in a system which they had been led to believe was *naukari*, or state-sponsored was accordingly diminished.<sup>32</sup>

From the 1840s onwards, the merchant-controlled labour streams were reinforced, mitigated or replaced with a state funded machinery of employees and institutions, bolstered by a series of legislative acts that regulated virtually all aspects of recruitment, transportation and policing of indentured labourers from village to overseas plantation. Emigration agents, protectors of emigrants and immigrants, customs officers and magistrates, ships' doctors and depot surgeons were employed to superintend the flow of labour to an increasing number of destinations that ultimately included Fiji, South Africa, Trinidad, Guadeloupe, and Martinique and a number of other Caribbean islands.<sup>33</sup> The setting up of this regulatory machinery was designed to invest the indenture system with safeguards both to minimise unfavourable comparisons with the now discredited slave trade and to render the operation more trustworthy for administrators and practitioners alike. In the process, a vast and bureaucratic operation of regulation and documentation was created. Government notices [see Figure 1] posted in recruiting districts advised prospective migrants of the terms and conditions on offer, to increase the confidence of recruits. Labour contracts were signed before a magistrate, to guarantee the rights of the worker as well as his/her duties towards the employer [see Figure 2] and receipts issued for remittances deposited.<sup>34</sup>



**Figure 1:** Government Notice to Indians Going To Mauritius

**Source:** National Archives of Mauritius

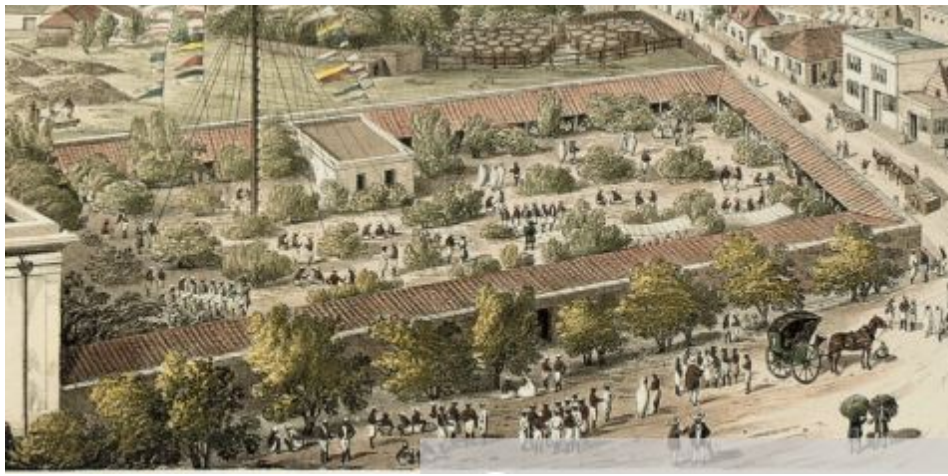


**Figure 2:** Sample Contract, 1839

**Source:** National Archives of Mauritius

Institutions were likewise an important part of the official infrastructure. Depots set up at the ports of embarkation and arrival provided migrants with a place to stay while awaiting transportation to and from their places of employment and these sites together with the officials who staffed them represented further evidence of indenture as a government sanctioned service. These institutions also functioned, of course, as convenient locales for the policing of migrants. Medical examinations could take place

there and recruits could be registered and issued with certificates and other documentation. Increasingly the immigration depots in the receiving colonies also became sites for the policing of migrants, where individuals would be photographed and issued with tickets and where vagrants might be incarcerated pending deportation or redeployment [Figure 3].<sup>35</sup>



**Figure 3:** The enclosed courtyard of the Immigration Depot at Mauritius

**Source:** Illustration from the Mauritius Commercial Bank collection, reproduced in *Voyage II Mauriciana* (Reunion: Musee Villele, 2005)

The regulation, documentation and institutional infrastructure of indenture helped to maintain trust in the notion that overseas labour migration was an avenue of socio-economic mobility even through lengthy periods of depression and wage stagnation. The well-educated Munshi Rahman Khan who included details of his indentured service in his posthumously published autobiography, described his enlistment for work in Surinam in terms of agreeing to take *naukari* [government service], and recruiters continued to open discussions with the question ‘*naukari loge*?’ [do you want *naukari*?] throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century. <sup>36</sup> However, the trust in

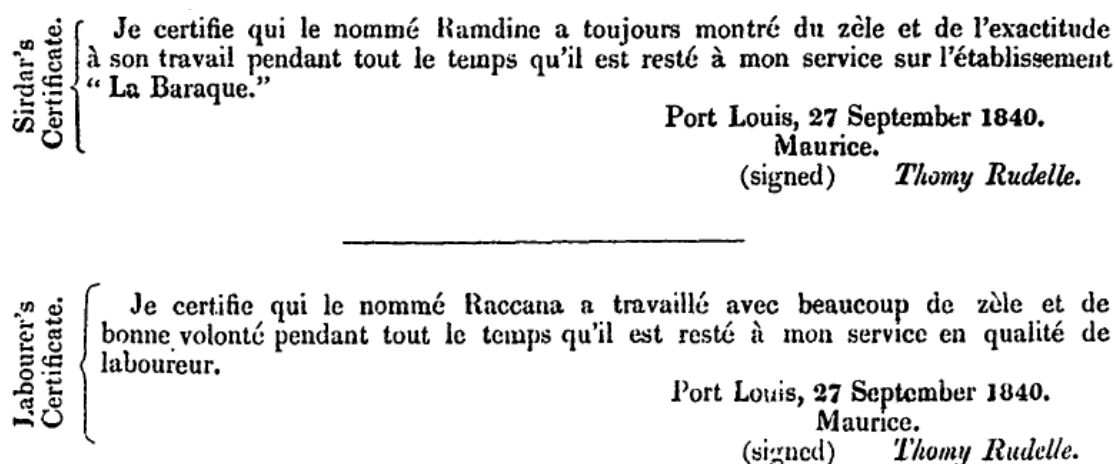
government run migration schemes was only one element in the equation. Alongside the commercial and official recruiting network, was a personalized, informal web of links and ties which, while not always accessible through the colonial archive, is key to understanding the maintenance and evolution of indenture in established locales.

### **The Evolution of Trust: informal networks of recruitment and migration**

The government-operated indenture system, initially set up to bolster the trustworthiness of the scheme, metamorphosed over time into a set of regulations devised as much to police as to protect the migrant. This evolution of the mechanics of state involvement in Indian labour migration, and its abuse, fostered, in turn, the development of means to subvert the instruments of central control, by and on behalf of the migrants themselves. Often abetted by individual employers and overseers [sirdars], informal networks operated within or alongside the official machinery. The return of trusted employees [often sirdars] to India to recruit family and friends was a widespread informal mechanism through which indentured labour mobilization could be facilitated to the more popular and well-known destinations. The toleration of some aspects of this parallel informal network on the part of emigration agents and protectors generated in turn various kinds of documentation that survive in the colonial archive. The note given to Dhibby Deen (introduction) is one example.

A similar 'good conduct' certificate was given to Ramdeen, formerly a *syce* [groom, or stable hand], who had embarked as a 'coolie' and returned as a sirdar to Calcutta aboard the ship 'John Bagshaw' on 10 December 1840. This document, written in the French language by the employer Thomy Rudelle stated 'I certify that the named Ramdine has

always shown zeal and care in his work during the time he was in my employment on ‘La Baraque’ establishment’ [Figure 4]. A similar certificate was issued to another of his returning labourers, named Raccana; this may be compared to an employer’s reference issued today, signifying the importance of trust in the new contractual relationship which had evolved between employer and employee, but one which is seldom discussed in the indenture literature.<sup>37</sup>



**Figure 4:** Good Conduct Certificates for Ramdine and Raccana

**Source:** British Parliamentary Papers, 1841 [45], Calcutta Commission of Enquiry, Appendices

The informal network of returnee-accompanied migration offered recruits an additional layer of security, which was a useful means of establishing trust in the early phases of migration to a particular territory. Emigrants would in most cases be unable to read the contracts they signed or the certificates handed to them; ‘old hands’ who travelled with them on the ‘coolie’ ships were more readily identifiable. Similarly, relationships developed on board – the so-called *jehaji bhai* or ship brotherhood – could lead to lasting and significant friendships.<sup>38</sup> In 1843 the emigration agent at



Madras, Captain C. Biden, discussed the concerns of a group of migrants engaged by a *maistry* named Ramasawmy, who had embarked 'at Pondicherry for the Mauritius about 4½ years ago, and he has now returned to India without his family expressly for the purpose of engaging coolies for the Mauritius.' The emigrants he had recruited were described as 'all willing and even anxious to be passed for the Mauritius but on the first day of the examination a difficulty arose over the time required to serve at the Mauritius to entitle them to a free passage back to India'. Ramasawmy had informed the men both of the rate of pay they would receive and of the fact that they would be entitled to a free passage back to India after a service of one year at the Mauritius. The migrants wished the Maistry's statement to be confirmed by the government agent. Once it was explained to them that the free return passage could not be guaranteed before five years, and that rates of pay would be set in Mauritius, there was some initial confusion, and it was not until the next day that the migrants returned and expressed themselves willing to migrate.<sup>39</sup>

Ramasawmy's story offers an interesting case study of the operation of the mechanics of indenture in both formal and informal settings. He described himself as 'a native of Chevolpootoor, a village in the Zillah of Trinnavelly', and explained that following a quarrel with his father Mootoo Caroopa Pillay, a *conicopoly*<sup>40</sup> for the district *tehsildar* [revenue officer] he went to Madura 'where a cooly maistry, named Caroopenan, engaged me to proceed to the isle of France as a labourer and took me to Pondicherry, where one Mootoo Naik, a Merchant, got me registered at the Police Office; after which I signed a document, engaging to serve a French Gentleman at the Mauritius, as a labourer for 5 years, on a salary of 5 rupees a month, besides Batta and

two cloths a year. Moottoo Naik then sent me to Cuddalore, with 200 other men and 36 women. On the 26th day of the month of Cartigay [November 1838], we were embarked on a ship bound to the island.’ Ramasawmy worked in sugar cane cultivation, married on Mauritius and had two children. Interviewed after his return to India in 1842, he explained, ‘the time of my engagement is not yet expired but my employer has sent me back to get 200 labourers, promising to give me 2 rupees for every individual I procure; he gave me a letter to the address of Messrs Hall and Bainbridge at Madras, with direction to draw on these gentlemen as much as I may require to hire labourers.’<sup>41</sup> The experience of Ramasawmy provides a clear demonstration of the development of a relationship of confidence between employer and recruiter, the latter being entrusted to draw funds upon Indian merchants to meet the costs of recruitment. Ramasawmy had also developed a good working relationship with his employer, a French planter, explaining that he was ‘a good gentleman, he was most kind to all the labourers, but particularly to me, for I did my duty to please him – he never stopped any of our pay on any account.’ Ramasawmy had saved 200 rupees from his labour which he had left in the care of his wife at Mauritius.

So well entrenched did the informal system of returnee and sirdari recruiting directly for employers become, that by the 1860s legislation had been enacted in Mauritius to enable overseas planters to make formal requisitions for a specific number of workers and to send a named individual to collect those workers, and accompany them through the depot, onto the ship and onwards to the plantation. The degree of trust involved in these transactions is evident from the large sums disbursed to such individuals who were now designated ‘special recruiters’.<sup>42</sup> Employers who had become

accustomed to workers of a specific ethnic group could now actively request their intermediaries to recruit among their local networks. This in turn facilitated the development of a sense of community on estates as regional clustering was thereby accelerated.<sup>43</sup> In these respects sirdari or returnee recruiting has significant aspects in common with the kangani style recruitment from India to plantations in Ceylon and Malaya in the same period. Sinnappah Arasaratnam has described 'kangani' as:

a person who was himself an immigrant working on the plantation as a foreman, or even as a labourer of some influence and standing. The employer would send him to India provided with money, to go to his village and district and recruit labourers among his own people. He was empowered to pay the passage and all other expenses connected with the migrants' departure.... There was now scope for the migration of families rather than individuals... When the kangany returned to Malaya with his group of labourers and delivered them to his employer, they were employed in that plantation, usually under the kangany who had recruited them. <sup>44</sup>

This method of recruiting labourers to the mutual advantage of all parties could not have worked well unless the government functionaries charged with superintending indentured migration were prepared to work with the returnees and not against them. Inevitably the parallel operation of informal and formal recruiting networks led to competition and clashes which in turn could damage the trust relationship between returnee or sirdari recruiters and their recruits.

### **The Breakdown of Trust in Labour Recruitment**

A common problem described by both recruits and returnee recruiters derived from the competing recruitment networks operating at the ports of embarkation and other centres in India. In 1847, it was reported that an employee in the Mauritius depot at Calcutta, known as 'Teeluck Babu', had been in the habit of extracting bribes of 10 to 15 rupees from 'old immigrants' [as returnees were known] and even larger sums from men 'sent up by planters to recruit'. Consequently, returnee recruiters were taking steps to conceal their identity, having brought their bands to the depot for embarkation.<sup>45</sup> Employees of the formal recruitment network not only competed with and sought to subvert the informal ties between returnees and new migrants but also in some cases co-opted such individuals to work alongside them. In Calcutta return emigrants were in some cases directly employed by emigration agents.<sup>46</sup> When Bombay was reopened to emigration in the early 1850s, the first step taken by the Mauritius authorities was to dispatch there '50 to 60 natives of that Presidency' for the purpose of gathering new recruits.<sup>47</sup> Similar problems were experienced at Madras, where a group of exasperated emigrants complained that returnee recruiters had been co-opted en masse to work at the behest of the local formal recruiting agents:

'We are poor and distressed people mostly cultivators of the interior countries, resolved to embark for the Mauritius for the purpose of bettering our circumstances ... There are nearly 70 maistries, deputies, under maistries, and collectors in men and women, the whole from Pondicherry come for the sole purpose of this traffic, they are all old hands who have robbed many thousands of poor fellows.... If we are suffered to come and register ourselves it would be of very great advantage to us, but the evil of being passed from one hand to another cuts us short of 6 or 7 rupees ... we are all kept in darkness, cheated to their heart's content and

then shipped off without the means of putting one quarter of a rupee into the hands of parting friends and relatives who come from distant places to bid us farewell.’<sup>48</sup>

In some cases recruiters might exploit the system to misrepresent the employer or place where a migrant wished to go, for personal gain. Veeram, working in Malaysia as a ‘road coolie’ addressed a letter of grievance to the Resident of Selangor in 1911 complaining of a kangani in India who had cheated his wife and sister, who were seeking to rejoin him, by falsely declaring the he was under engagement to an estate and sending them there. The Manager of the estate was unwilling to break their formal contracts to him, on the basis of their informal ties elsewhere.<sup>49</sup> The incompatibility of verbal agreements made between individuals seeking to rejoin relatives with the legal contracts they were obliged to sign to effect the transfer, is again underscored.

Such problems could not effectively be solved while the official recruitment system operated in competition with the informal networks, especially where intermediaries were offered extra remuneration in the form of bribes to breach the verbal agreements made with migrants. The evidence of continuing issues on this front emerged in 1883 when a group of recruiters who worked in Calcutta, India addressed a letter to the Protector of Immigrants in Mauritius:

We the undersigned recruiters of the Mauritius Depot, beg to inform your worship's notice that at present we are in great difficulty by the departure of the Emigration Agent of the place. The said Agent was in habit of asking every recruiter and emigrants about their condition and the treatment of the office Baboos [clerks]. From the time of his departure we are in great oppression the reason is this that the Baboos named Ishan Jogeadro and Umbica often charge per cooly rupee one at the time of embarkation. The ration of the coolies are also given by them, the coolies are not sufficiently fed for they deduct from their ration and keep

for their own benefit. .... If any recruiter goes to Baboos the Baboo says to give up your licence and so the recruiter postponed their work for the Baboos get their benefit from the extra work of supplying rations, clothes and do not care the government works, and as the ship delays for embarkation, and if the clerks Umbica and Ishan will remain in their situation no one will be able to recruit.<sup>50</sup>

Where recruiters lacked support from local officials, or where they were relatively powerless in the face of entrenched local interests, the trust relationship with the recruit could be adversely affected. Samita Sen's research on the 'garden sirdars' in Assam is one of many examples that serve to indicate how abuses in recruitment for certain territories or industries could lead to an enduring break down of trust. In the case of Assam, although officials agreed that using ex-workers to recruit other labourers was a good idea, they were frequently subverted and bribed by professional recruiters and allegedly used their local connections in the villages merely to cheat people.<sup>51</sup>

Further complicating factors in the establishment and maintenance of the trust relationship in indentured recruiting centre around the competing discourses which impacted on legislative intervention and control of the system. Planter and reformist agendas, competition between colonial powers over the control and representation of migration, and later nationalist agitation represent a few of the several areas in which propaganda was used as a tool to influence attitudes to indenture and had the potential or indeed actually adversely impacted upon the establishment of trust between recruit and recruiter.<sup>52</sup> Reformists played a useful role in helping to curb over-enthusiastic representations on the part of overseas planters as to the work opportunities on offer, but they were equally likely to have an adverse impact. One example of circumstances in which the arguments and activities of reformists could impact on the life chances of

migrants was revealed by a petition addressed by 12 worried immigrants to the Governor of Mauritius in 1841. Having made their way to the island from Pondicherry, they were informed that their arrival was in breach of an order banning the recruitment of agricultural labourers. This ban had been put in place as a result of pressure from the Anti Slavery Society in Britain and reformist supports in India, but had adverse consequences for informal recruitment streams already in place and particularly for families seeking to rejoin kin already overseas. The twelve would-be migrants protested against the prohibition which ‘amounts to starvation for them.’<sup>53</sup>

That negative publicity surrounding indentured migration could have an adverse impact on the trust relationship between returnees and prospective recruits, is demonstrated with particular clarity in South Africa where a scheme to send successful sirdars to recruit in India coincided with a nationalist anti-indenture campaign. Sirdar Muthusamy had collected 7 Indians in his village when another sirdar from Natal arrived there and informed the villages of ‘the present agitation in Natal’.

He warned the villagers to take care of their children chiefly young women. He made the people believe that some sirdars are purposely come to India to take away from their kith and kin, some young women of fair complexion to get rich husbands in Natal, and thereby get some large amount. This was a talk all over.

Muthusamy’s evidence revealed the very real dangers faced by returnee recruiters where local magistrates joined in the hostility to overseas migration: ‘One day the village magistrate sent for me and I went. He told me that I shall be held responsible if any persons were missing in the village and that I should not speak to any women during my

stay. All this discouraged me. I resolved to abandon the idea of recruitment.’ Sirdar Periya Gengadu was amazed at the power of the anti-indenture propaganda:

I was really astonished to see my close relations and intimate friends holding aloof. Vernacular pamphlets announcing the arrival of one hundred Natal sirdars to take away all the villagers to an unknown country were distributed to the public ... 15 men who were negotiating with me privately to emigrate changed their minds and absconded at Ramapuram railway station. This made the situation worse. The villagers began to suspect me. The village magistrate put a guard on me ... Seeing all these difficulties, I begged of my wife to go with me to Natal. After a deliberate consideration she agreed. She also influenced 3 Indians. I became sick on account of the worry on all sides.’<sup>54</sup>

Analyses of indenture and related forms of subaltern migration from India thus need to take account of the role and strength of pressure groups and international political events, which inevitably colour the perspectives and attitudes of groups involved in formal and informal labour mobilization activities.

### **Intermediaries and Trust in the Workers’ World**

Once the migrants reached their destination, their remuneration and conditions of work depended upon a network of trust between them, the sirdar/kangani, and the planters. The payment of wages and monetary transactions provide a fertile ground from which to look at these dynamics, and indicate that alongside or outside the world of the written contract, many other arrangements were in place that were in many cases of greater



import to the labourer. The sirdar/kangani held great responsibility for the wages of his labourers. For example, he could retain a portion of their monthly wages as a form of saving on their behalf. This could then be returned when they wished to send money home, were returning to India, or if they became ill and their pay was docked. The intermediary was also known to lend money at a price for special purposes, such as for the marriages of labourers or of family back home. Perhaps one of the most authoritative functions the sirdar/kangani could have was the pooling of labourers' wages to then divide and redistribute. The levels of trust required for such activities are self-evident. The pooling of wages could work to the advantage of the workers, ensuring that any punishment deductions made by planters against an individual could be rendered ineffective.

In surviving records it is common for sirdars/kanganis to be maligned by planters who were sceptical of their motivations, this clearly in part arose from competition between the planter/state and the intermediaries for influence over the labourers, in which trust was an important factor. One official in Mauritius commented:

'The competition now existing between the planter and the job-contractor, who is generally some old Sirdar, who has acquired influence over his comrades, and induced them on the expiration of their first engagement to place themselves under his orders, is now altogether in favour of the latter, who is always able to offer higher wages, exemption from discipline and continual leave of absence, with the same guarantee to the laborer for the payment of his wages.'<sup>55</sup>

Allegations of workers being ‘crimped’ or lured away from one estate or employer to another can seem like a simple betrayal of trust on the part of the intermediary but may in fact be more indicative of the loss of control by the planter and the recourse to his ally, the magistrate, to re-affirm that authority. Thus, the petition of Samyiah and Kurpanan, charged with crimping coolies from a Malaysian estate can be read either as testimony of the bad faith of the former, or a state punishment for their undue influence, or thirdly, as they themselves contended, a completely erroneous prosecution of independent men who were simply visiting relatives on the estate.<sup>56</sup>

The bad reputation given to sirdars by the complaints of colonial planters can sometimes be explained away as arising from genuine concerns resulting from cultural ignorance and misunderstanding. It was often rather an indication of displeasure at the influence the sirdar wielded, particularly when this was seen as undermining measures put in place by the planters. A clear example of this emerges in July 1840, when two sirdars were dismissed from the service of a Mademoiselle Bestel by Magistrate Pearce. He found that they had:

headed and excited a riotous meeting of the Indian labourers in her service, on which occasion another sirdar was hung in effigy ... and the whole property in the worst state of disorder for 24 hours. [Sirdar Goordial was said to have] given the worst advice to the men under his orders, telling them not to work so fast, and that if they made 30 cane holes they would get their 5 rupees and would get no more if they made 60.<sup>57</sup>

The Royal Commission of 1875 which investigated the functioning of the indenture system on Mauritius contains ample evidence of ill feeling towards sirdars, with several planters describing their moneylending activities and other means used by them of

retaining wages of the labourers.<sup>58</sup> However, it is the complaints of labourers themselves about such activities that offer the most compelling evidence that some allegations of malpractice on the part of intermediaries were not unfounded. The power held by sirdars certainly created opportunities for them to line their own pockets. The petition of Maha Lingam and his wife Suparnah, coolies on the coffee estate of Mr Meikle, in Malaysia, thus declared themselves so burdened by the unjust exactions of one Nagamalay kangani, that they requested free passages to India to escape the misery of life at his hands of their extortioner who had effectively rendered them 'penniless, homeless and on the verge of starvation'. The formal infrastructure of protection offered them no succour. The petition was viewed by the Resident who replied coldly that 'their remedy lies in application to the Court and that he is unable to render the pecuniary assistance asked for.'<sup>59</sup> All the regulations in the world could evidently not save the weak who were preyed on by the unscrupulous. Their case was not an isolated one. The coolies of Kuala Langat addressed a collective petition against the overseer Supramaniam of Kalthiath, accusing him of a litany of offences against them, including:

He supplies rice to coolies and receives their wages on the pay day, rendering false accounts; He engages daily Immigrant coolies named Nagappan and Munian to drive his own carts and charges them in the check roll. For looking after his cows and selling milk outside he has got the cooly Arumugathan who is also charged in the check roll. He has engaged a women named Veeramah to bring water to his house from Matagh Bazaar. This women and five or six others are entered in the check roll. These are engaged for collecting firewood, cutting grass for the cattle. He separated Papayee the wife of Marapa Kanda a stone breaking coolie and given her to Murugasoo on receipt of \$30. ... On account of the injustice, cruel deeds and bad character we cannot bear any more and will

run away. If this overseer is sent elsewhere and another overseer takes this place then we will work.<sup>60</sup>

On this occasion, some account was taken of the petition but the overseer received no punishment other than to be transferred elsewhere.

Alongside the litany of complaints, from planters and labourers alike, there were dissenting voices regarding the position of the intermediary in the world of the colonial labour migrant. Abuse of the sirdar-labourer relationship went both ways according to a Mauritian planter, Mr Wiehe: 'it is supposed that sirdars cheat the men, and to a certain extent that is true; but ... the men also managed to get money out of the sirdars ... and sirdars have frequently complained to him that these men have gone off without repaying them'. Another planter, Mr Antelme, explained that sirdars sometimes loaned money without interest to keep their men in the gang and obtain their re-engagement, and that 'they are the real sufferers by any delay in wage payments', further while sirdars did indeed often receive double rations, this was 'so that absentees who lose their wages and rations can obtain food from the sirdar'.<sup>61</sup>

Sirdars who kept their gangs together often played their most crucial role at the end of the period of indenture by persuading workers to stay on, rather than return home, and negotiating for them better terms and conditions in the light of the skills they had acquired, whilst at the same time earning a benefit for themselves. Thus W.W. West, a British owner of the Vale plantation Mauritius in 1845 stated that he had not been able to re-engage any men, despite offering an increase of wages: 'The employment of sirdars is at the root of the evil. These men induce the labourers by false promises and delusive prospects to leave, and then sell them to some other planter'. Tiroumoudy, of

the Bon Espoir plantation, Riviere du Rempart, concurred, noting the he lost three bands of men, two because a man in the group wanted to be sirdar. He thus lost a band from Calcutta, a group of Brahmins from Bombay. And one because the workers wanted higher terms than he was prepared to offer. He noted that he had one band whose engagements are about to expire and that 'a strange sirdar from the neighbourhood has been among them trying to persuade them to re-engage elsewhere ... Many sirdars make a regular trade of this kind of embauchage. They receive either a reward of high wages for themselves and in addition a rupee a head for each man whom they engage'.<sup>62</sup> Whilst alleging that the sirdars were the principal beneficiaries, a petition of planters in 1847 made similar complaints: 'older sirdars further establish great dominion over these men by advances of money at enormous interest... At the end of their engagement, by this singular authority they take away their bands, which they invariably sell to those who, in extremity, for want of hands, readily give a large sum.'<sup>63</sup>

A complex picture of the informal relationships of trust between labourer and sirdar/kangani and planter and of both with the government can be teased out from these sources. Malpractice was bound to exist, but it is important not always to take the occurrence of it in colonial archives at face value: the maligning of intermediaries is not necessarily representative of the reality, and it is crucial to assess how we know about cases of 'breach of trust' and the conditions in which they come to light. Multiple ways to read the archive are exemplified in the documentation of 'crimping' or 'abduction' of labour by intermediaries, depending on the perspective of accuser and accused. Above all, it is important to remember that informal relationships were carried on for the most

part invisibly and with mutual benefit and are only documented in colonial archives when they go wrong. A naive use of such sources will tend to exaggerate the role of the colonial administration and underestimate the extent to which migrants were able to manage their affairs themselves.

## **Conclusions**

The contractual arrangements of indentured migration have been recognized as an effort to regulate labour conditions.<sup>64</sup> Nevertheless, the formal structures regulating the mobilization of workers and their status on estates are only part of the story. The informal networks of trust which developed between labourers, intermediaries and employers are clearly crucial to the effective maintenance of economic relationships and were often more harmonious than official archives and the historical literature might suggest. Trust requires more than the correct application of mutually agreed contractual arrangements; knowledge and information were an integral part of the process, and in these grey areas, intermediaries play an important and often unacknowledged role.

The colonial archive carefully documents the efforts made by officials, cynically or otherwise, to engender trust in the official system of indentured recruitment and employment. At the same time, it offers glimpses into the vast pyramid of informal relationships by which labourers were apprised of opportunities overseas, organised to migrate in gangs of labourers from the same locality, and through which they managed their relationships with employers overseas. By means of correspondence and word of mouth, often carried by returnees, sirdars and kanganis, a vital channel of knowledge

and information was funnelled to recruits. In the overseas context, collective action, often organised or fronted by *sirdars* / *kanganis* was initiated to mitigate exploitative behaviour by planters and officials. The influence that intermediaries held over workers was at times attacked by employers who sought to use the machinery of the state – law-makers and law-enforcers – to reassert their control over labour. In many cases, money and power were weapons used against labour to subvert intermediaries to act in the interests of employers; at other times all parties benefited from the parallel systems of formal and informal management of indenture and supported their continuance. In practice, therefore, informal networks of trust were integral and indispensable for the successful operation of the system of indentured overseas migration. A great many collective efforts by workers and their sirdars to manage their work experience were successful and unreported in the colonial archive. These affective relationships seem to have had a profound influence over the process and structure of indentured labour migration. To uncover this aspect we need to read carefully against the grain of colonial sources and to attend as closely as possible to the words of the migrants themselves.

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\*Research for this paper was undertaken in the National Archives of the United Kingdom, Myanmar, Malaysia, Sri Lanka, and Mauritius and was funded as part of the 'Becoming Coolies' research project by the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council. [www.coolitude.shca.ed.ac.uk](http://www.coolitude.shca.ed.ac.uk)

<sup>1</sup> British Library (BL), *Parliamentary Papers*, 1841 Session 1 (427). Hill coolies. Copies of papers respecting the exportation of hill coolies, received from the government of India; in continuation of those presented to the House of Commons on the 11th day of February last. Appendix, p. 51.

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<sup>2</sup> Marina Carter's *Servants, Sirdars and Settlers: Indians in Mauritius, 1834-1874* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995), was one of the first book length studies to investigate and chart the extent of returnee recruiting and to demonstrate that the pattern of recruitment changed over time, as the role of mercantile houses declined and sirdari or returnee activities increased. The book sought to provide a more nuanced understanding of indenture in Mauritius than had been presented by Hugh Tinker's classic *A New System of Slavery, The Export of Indian Labour Overseas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974). Dr Carter followed this survey of indenture in Mauritius with *Voices from Indenture: Experiences of Indian Migrants in the British Empire* (London: Leicester University Press, 1996), which broadened the approach to include examples from other sites of the indentured archipelago.

<sup>3</sup> See Niklas Luhmann, *Trust and Power* (Chichester: Wiley, 1979.) and *Ecological communication*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1989), also Gambetta, D. (ed.) *Trust: Making and breaking cooperative relations* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1988), and Piotr Sztompka, *Trust: A Sociological Theory* (Cambridge University Press, 1999).

<sup>4</sup> W. Mishler, W. and R. Rose, R., 'What are the Origins of Political Trust?: Testing Institutional and Cultural Theories in Post-Communist Societies', *Comparative Political Studies* 34(1): 30-62. K. Newton and P. Norris, 'Confidence in Public Institutions: Faith, Culture, or Performance?' in S. Pharr and R. Putnam, (eds.), *Disaffected Democracies* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), pp 52-73.

<sup>5</sup> In India nearly 81% are employed in the informal sector, where commonly there are no contracts or taxes paid. See International Labour Organisation, *Women and Men in the Informal Economy – A Statistical Picture* (Third edition) (Geneva: ILO, 2018).

<sup>6</sup> Jacob Dearmon and Kevin Grier, 'Trust and Development', *Journal of Economic Behaviour and Organization* 71 (2009): 210–220.

<sup>7</sup> A. Lester, 'Imperial Circuits and Networks: Geographies of the British Empire', *History Compass* 4: 1 (2006), 124–141.

<sup>8</sup> Natasha Glaisyer, 'Networking: Trade and Exchange in the Eighteenth-Century British Empire', *The Historical Journal*, Vol. 47, No. 2 (Jun., 2004), 451-476.

<sup>9</sup> Peter Robb, 'Mr Upjohn's Debts: Money and friendship in early colonial Calcutta', *Modern Asian Studies*, Volume 47, 4 (July 2013), 1185 – 1217.

<sup>10</sup> The term 'emotionology' was coined by P.N. and C.Z. Stearn in 1985: 'Emotionology: Clarifying the History of Emotions and Emotional Standards'. *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 90, No. 4 (Oct., 1985), 813-836. For a more recent survey of work in this field see Johannes Lang 'New Histories of Emotion', *History and Theory* 57, no. 1 (March 2018), 104-120



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- <sup>12</sup> Ibid., pp 346-352.
- <sup>13</sup> Nathan Nunn and Leonard Wantchekon argue, for example, that 'within Africa low levels of trust can be traced back to the legacy of the slave trade' [p. 3249], 'The Slave Trade and the Origins of Mistrust in Africa', *The American Economic Review*, Vol. 101, No. 7 (2011), 3221-3252.
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<sup>39</sup> MA PL 57 Captain C Biden to J T Thomas, Chief Secretary to Government, Madras 24 February 1843.

<sup>40</sup> A conicopoly in British India was a 'native accountant or clerk', the term derives from the tamil word *kaṇakkappillai*, from *kaṇakkan* (accountant) + *pillai* (caste signifier).

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